SILVICULTURE

Regeneration Programs Section
Silviculture Branch, 31 Bastion Square, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7

Regeneration Notes #3

Public Opinion on Prescribed Burning in British Columbia

Introduction

In order to better understand public opinion about prescribed burning and the basis for that opinion, the Ministry of Forests commissioned a public opinion poll on prescribed burning in British Columbia. The opinion poll was conducted by telephone between February 25 and March 08, 1991 and included 612 British Columbians aged 18 years or older. The poll was designed to provide information that would help to address four questions:

1. How important an issue is prescribed fire? What percentage of the population feel that they are directly affected by this practice and how are they affected?
2. How knowledgeable is the public about the provincial prescribed burning program?
3. Would the public generally support a well managed prescribed burning program?
4. What is the most effective way of providing information about the program?

Prescribed Fire – The Issue

Early in the interview, individuals were asked to identify environment-related forest management issues of greatest concern. This request was "unaided," meaning that the respondents presented their own ideas, rather than selecting from a list of possible concerns. As indicated in Figure 1, "slashburning" seldom rated as the forest issue of greatest concern.

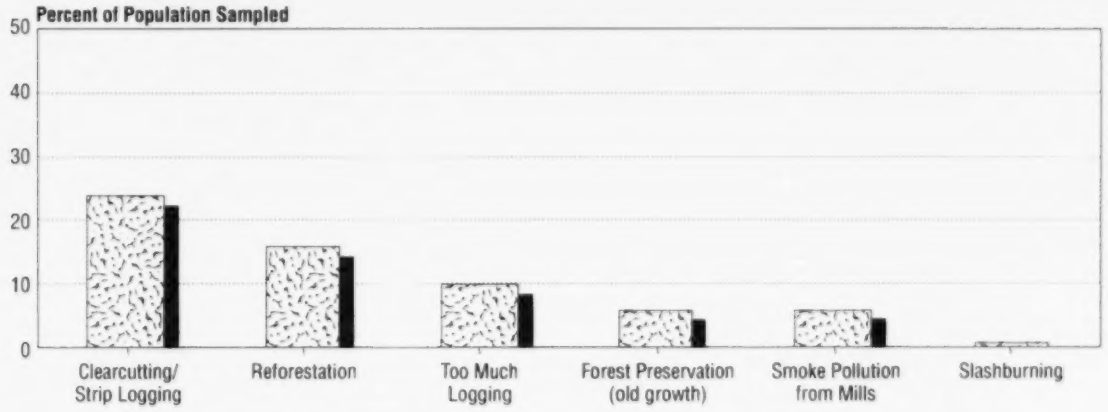

FIGURE 1. Forest issues of greatest concern

Province of British Columbia
Ministry of Forests

Respondents were then provided with a list of potential issues and were asked to rate their level of concern. As indicated in Figure 2, public concern is generally high for both forestry and non-forestry issues. The use of prescribed burning in forestry was given an average rating of 4.6 on a 7-point scale, a somewhat lower average rating than the other issues presented. It must be noted that this poll was conducted in winter and tends to measure a sustained level of concern rather than the highest level of concern. Public concern would be expected to increase during the burning season.

Knowledge of Prescribed Burning

Prior to providing standard definitions for prescribed burning and slashburning, respondents were asked to define these terms in their own words. Fully one-third of all respondents could not define prescribed burning, whereas 21% could not define slashburning. Those who could define prescribed burning tended to view it as a planned burn, noting that it was planned or was undertaken for a specific purpose such as cleaning a site for planting. On the other hand, slashburning was most commonly defined as "burning debris left from logging."

Most respondents were uncertain about the outcomes of prescribed burning. They agreed that it encouraged successful replanting of logged areas and removed debris that otherwise could have been a fire hazard. On the other hand, they tended to think that it adversely affected wildlife.

Most respondents (86%) understood that prescribed burning was regulated to some extent. However, the degree of control was unclear. Regulation is perceived to be with respect to the time of year and the amount done in one place or at one time. The effect on the local ecology and the amount of smoke produced were not considered, by many respondents, to be part of the regulation process (Figure 3).

Personal Affect of Prescribed Burning on Respondents

When asked to indicate the degree to which they had been personally affected by prescribed fire (where 1 indicated not at all affected and 7 indicated very much affected), on a provincial basis, 49% of the respondents indicated that they had not been personally affected by fire while 16% rated the question as 5 or greater (Figure 4). It is important to note that the proportion of people personally affected by fire differs by geographical area. For the purpose of this study, the six forest regions were grouped as follows: Vancouver, Kamloops/Nelson, Cariboo/Prince George/Prince Rupert. Respondents in the Kamloops/Nelson regions reported being more strongly affected by prescribed burning than the other groups. In these forest regions 28% of the respondents rated the question as 5 or

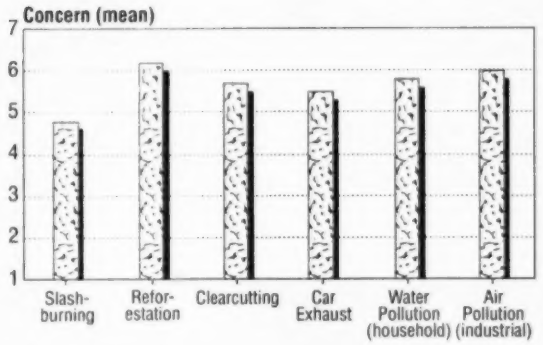

FIGURE 2. Concern about specific forestry and non-forestry issues

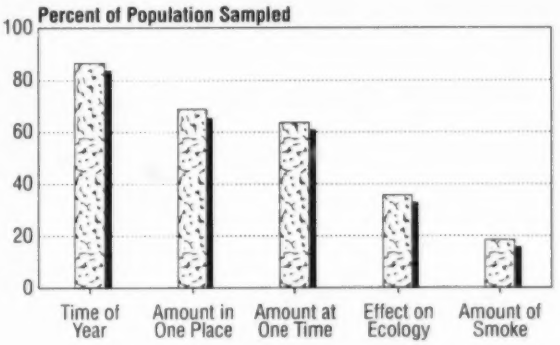

FIGURE 3. Eighty-six percent of respondents believed that prescribed burning was regulated for some or all of these parameters

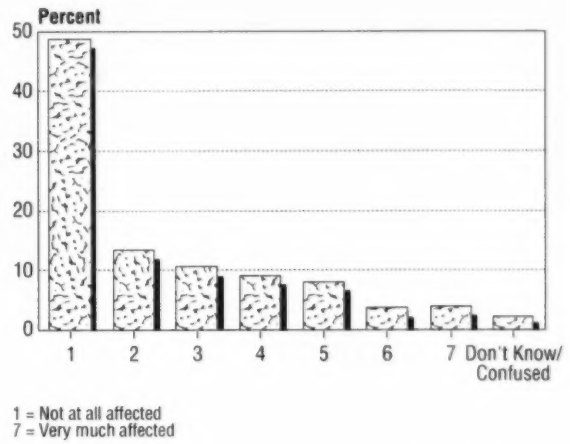

FIGURE 4. The degree to which respondents had been personally affected by prescribed burning for British Columbia

greater. Overall, smoke was the main concern of the respondents who reported being strongly affected by prescribed burning.

A relatively high level of concern is echoed by a recent company-wide public opinion poll undertaken by Tolko Industries Ltd.[1] where Tolko employees regarded "slashburning" as second only to clearcutting when identifying the most damaging activity of the forest industry.

Support for a Prescribed Burn Program

When asked how likely would they be to support a prescribed burn program, responses generally concentrated in the neutral zone. However, 15% of the respondents were extremely unlikely to support such a program (Figure 5).

When the desirability of prescribed burning was compared to a list of other treatment methods, prescribed burning was seen as slightly less desirable than several other prescriptions. However, prescribed burning was seen as significantly more desirable than the use of herbicides (Figure 6).

Information Sources

Given the choices shown in Figure 7, most respondents said they would read pamphlets about prescribed burning if delivered to their home or read newspaper articles on prescribed burning. However, few suggested that they would pick up pamphlets in a public place or attend information meetings. In general, Figure 7 suggests that the more accessible information is, the more likely it is to be used.

[1] EcoLogic, Tolko Industries Ltd., January, 1991

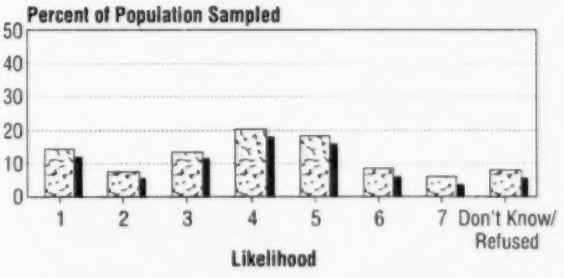

FIGURE 5. Likelihood of respondents supporting a prescribed burn program

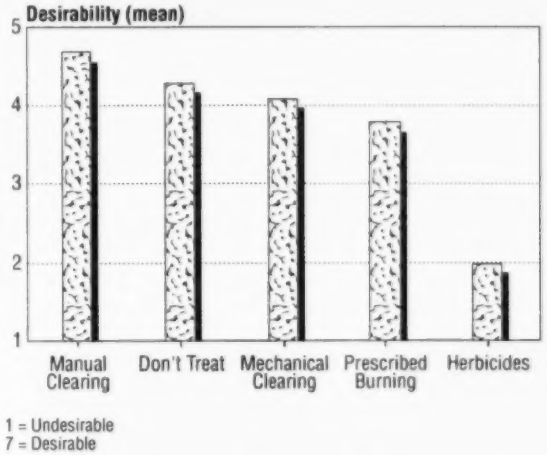

FIGURE 6. Respondent preference for treatment alternatives

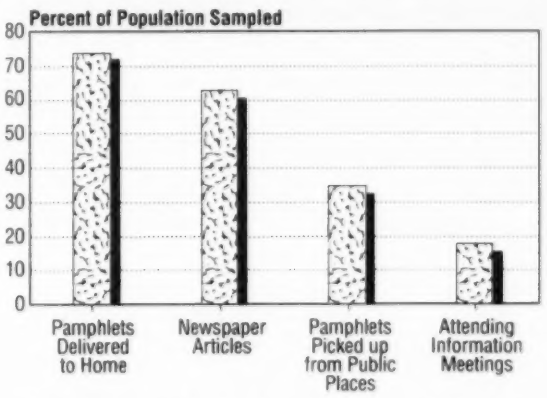

FIGURE 7. Likelihood of respondents to obtain information on prescribed burning from four sources

Conclusions

1. Compared to other forestry and non-forestry issues, the concern over prescribed fire was relatively low. However, concern was high in localized areas. The greatest concern expressed by respondents was concern over smoke. The need for maintaining a high level of control over smoke is obvious.
2. A considerable number of respondents were not familiar with the term "prescribed burning" and most respondents were uncertain about the outcomes of prescribed burning. However, those who could define prescribed burning tended to view it as planned or having a specific purpose such as cleaning a site for planting. More respondents were able to define slashburning but generally defined it as burning debris left after logging.
3. The majority of those polled felt that prescribed fire was regulated in some way. However, it was generally felt by most respondents that regulation did not extend to smoke management or the effect of fire on the local ecology.
4. Most respondents would read pamphlets about prescribed burning if they were delivered to their home, or read newspaper articles on prescribed burning. Few suggested that they would pick up pamphlets in a public place or attend information meetings. In general, the more accessible information is made, the more likely it is to be used.
5. Concern about prescribed burning was closely associated with concern about forestry management in general. Therefore, information about prescribed burning should be delivered in a context of good overall management of our forests.

For more information, contact:

Lorne Bedford
Site Preparation and Planting Officer
Silviculture Branch
Ministry of Forests
31 Bastion Square
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7
(604) 387-8901

Phil Taudin-Chabot
Superintendent, Fire Prevention
Protection Branch
Ministry of Forests
31 Bastion Square
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7
(604) 387-8701

Jim Challenger
Public Affairs Branch
Ministry of Forests
595 Pandora Avenue
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3E7
(604) 387-5255